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How to Stand Out in the Crowd? Innovate, Innovate, Innovate.

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In the world of marketing and branding, sticking out like a sore thumb is not necessarily a bad thing, advises brand innovation specialist Chandran Dharmarajan, a co-founder of I-morph, a marketing innovation consultancy based in Singapore. Dharmarajan, who has worked for over a decade with Unilever in India and Thailand followed by a stint with Kraft Foods Asia Pacific, was speaking at a recent seminar, "Transform Your Business By Being Remarkable", organised by the UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre of the Singapore Management University.

The seminar also featured guest speakers Ting Choon Meng, chairman and CEO of HealthSTATS International and president of the Fellowship of Inventors, and Donald Dalderup, managing director and innovation catalyst of the New Business Development Academy (NBDA).

"If there's any way a product could stand out in a sea of similar products, it's through differentiation", says Dharmarajan. Many companies, such as Proctor & Gamble, have stayed ahead of the game over the years because of their differentiation strategies. Dell, for example, was the first computer manufacturer to differentiate itself by allowing customers the flexibility to configure their own computers, a win-win situation for both parties. There are many ways by which to differentiate a product or service -- branding and advertising, packaging design, distribution channels and retail outlets.

Dharmarajan believes that at the root of differentiation lies an invention, i.e. "a new idea made into reality but not in the marketplace yet". The flying machine invented by the Wright brothers is an example of an invention which initially had no economic value. Other entrepreneurs subsequently innovated -- transformed the invention into an innovation -- by turning the machine into a commercially viable and marketable mode of transportation, the airplane.

Innovate or Evaporate

Another fundamental concerning differentiation, says Dharmarajan, is the need to "innovate or evaporate". Differentiation is essential to survive and grow because products and services are increasingly similar. Differentiation strategies can take any form -- be it technology, performance, design or personality -- but a great deal of effort needs to go into setting one's own product apart from others. "It's not enough to have some little differences in the product or service," says Dharmarajan. "Very importantly, the sum of the whole product or service must look different." He quotes Albert Einstein who said, "There is nothing that is more certain a sign of insanity than to do the same thing over and over and expect the results to be different".

Innovation is born when rules are broken, a new need is created, or when the world is perceived from a different angle. Some examples of innovative products include square watermelons, digital dumbbells, multi-purpose handphones, and butter stick-type applicators. No idea is too small, emphasises Dharmarajan, who feels that a healthy portfolio of ideas should consist of a good balance of big brilliant ideas and smaller ideas. "It's the sum of the whole idea that counts," he said.

Where do the insights for innovative ideas come from? He suggests looking up data, observation studies, research and even engaging in intense dialogue with people. "To get somewhere, talk to people," he said, "and don't worry if it drives them nuts."

Above all, Dharmarajan urges businesses not to be complacent. "Don't just stay in your comfort zone," he said. "Anything can happen. Competition is always knocking on the door and competition can come from anywhere." For example, he describes how Toshiba -- a manufacturer and marketer of household and office automation products and computer systems -- came out with the W62T Sportio handphone with value-added features such as an acceleration sensor, GPS and calorie counter.

"So we have to stay ahead. To do that, we don't just innovate for growth. We have to innovate while growing too. Innovate with everything from product to processes to services. Very importantly, innovate now," said Dharmarajan, "and do it yourself."

Mining Your Own 'Oil Field'

I-morph guest speaker Ting Choon Meng, president of the newly created Fellowship of Inventors in Singapore, and an inventor of medical devices himself, provided more insights on inventors and inventions. "The man who invented the wheel is an idiot. The man who added another three wheels is a genius," he said. Turning a one wheel invention into a mode of transportation was the innovation here.


Whether invention, innovation or differentiation, Ting's take on these concepts is that "China can do it better, India can do it cheaper and both can do it faster!" In fact, he predicts that, at the current rate of acceleration, half of all MNCs (multinational corporations) globally will be Chinese or Indian owned in 20 years' time. A small country such as Singapore could not match these giants in terms of critical mass and volume, but could draw on its own 'oilfields', innovative ideas and inventions. He points out that a Singaporean company invented the ubiquitous thumb drive, for example. Ting also emphasises the need to systematically explore and exploit intellectual property (IP) strategies to build and maintain competitive advantage.


Catalyst for Innovation

Another I-morph guest speaker, Donald Dalderup, managing director of the New Business Development Academy (NBDA), believes that ideas and insights for innovation can come from many sources -- demographics, industry markets and structures, process employees, changes in public perception, new technologies, scientific findings and, even, the unexpected and incongruous. Once an idea is born, one can move an innovation along by strategising, brainstorming, formulating and fine-tuning concepts, testing its business viability and, eventually, launching it into the market.

Dalderup is convinced that good ideas are not hard to find. Instead, the real problem is implementing the ideas due to the lack of funding. While good ideas can surface from anyone at any level in a company, getting support from top management is vital for ideas to materialise. And, "like it or not", he says, "no innovator is self-sufficient". Group thinking is necessary, and a good ecosystem is integral to successful innovation and differentiation. As the saying goes, two brains are better than one.

According to Dalderup, an ecosystem is comprised of a vision and mission, process, talent and culture. Firstly, innovators must know specifically what they want to do and hope to achieve. Secondly, they must bear in mind that an innovation is an ongoing process and, therefore, reinvention is necessary for the product or service to stay competitive. Thirdly, no ecosystem is complete without talent – i.e. the brains behind the innovation. To maximise the potential contribution of talent to the company, it is vital to "nurture them and not to tell them what to do, as many bosses are guilty of doing", says Dalderup. Last but not least, a healthy innovation culture overall is necessary in the company for the whole ecosystem to function effectively.

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